of it following him, heard Spock crash into the greenery and didn't dare fire again, added himself to the mele. It was incredibly quick and strong. It sent the Vulcan staggering away into the dark, put a knee in Kirk's stomach and backhanded him away, out into the light. Kirk tried to keep moving, but he was only half conscious; dazzling shadows confounded his vision.

"No!" that was Spock's voice, and there were feet running past Kirk, and the bright light of the laser again, shocking sight into his eyes. T'serek had come from the other side of the room. He had not had time to reach the killer as its weapon centered on Kirk, only time to thrust himself between them. Spock's hands, closing about the killer's neck, had found their mark too late, and Dray was falling as Kirk heard its spine snap.

Spock came to Dray, took one look at the wound, and went weakly to his knees. The Guthrie's eyes were open, watching him, and they read the truth in the dark gaze Spock was too honest to turn away.

"Now it is dead."

"Yes," Spock answered.

Dray indicated Kirk with a glance. "And he--safe?"

Kirk couldn't answer. Dray's low voice, hoarsened a little with his effort to hide the pain, pierced him, stabbed him past all healing.

"Yes," said Spock. He swallowed, tried to speak, say something but one senseless monosyllable.

"Be glad," said Dray "What you loved--was--worthy of love. Serving him--I served--you."

Kirk had never heard such love in a human voice, such satisfaction. And Spock the guarded, Spock the silent, acknowledged debt past all repayment.

"I have my joy at your hands." He stroked the boy's crisp hair back, hesitated, and bent to kiss his forehead, his closing eyes.

Kirk turned away. He had no right to watch, no right to Spock's regard, Dray's blithe absolution. Pain seared his chest, closed his throat. Oh, God, just let me die instead. But it was Dray who died, quiet and content, in Spock's arms, where he could never be in life. Kirk felt the emptiness. There was a long moment of silence before Spock rose. A horror of being touched slid Kirk away from the Vulcan, away from the youth and beauty and valor lying at their feet.

"He came after you first. I--" How could he make Spock understand?

"You came," said Spock.

The guards were coming in, he couldn't speak before them. McCoy was fussing at them, demanding that he see what Spock had killed. It was Clement, armed in the metal cap and armored gloves of the 'Wielda.

"That is the artifact," verified Spock, "two parts of it. Clement must have assumed it after the host was killed. The room was dark and full of steam."

"He still had to get here," said Kirk. "And there had to be some reason for--the perversion."

"He rode our transmitter beam, just like they warned," said Scotty grimly. "I should have reported it before, but you'll ken we though the beastie was dead. When Brown left the transporter room to look for something to clean up with, there was a power surge. I've known it this week long, but I never thought it was important."

They looked down at the artifact. It looked innocuous enough, except for the burn line where metal met flesh and the way Clement's skin sank in toward the bone."

"Shall I try to take them off him?" asked McCoy.

"No, let's just make sure of it this time. Scotty, antimatter was a good idea. Beam the body and the artifact out into space with enough antimatter to make it permanent this time. Don't beam anything back in. And don't leave anyone alone with it!"

"No, sir." Scott directed his men to handle the body carefully.

Kirk looked around, at Dray's body. Without being bidden, Spock gathered it up and led the way to sickbay. McCoy covered the still figure and demanded a brief look at Spock's hands.

"You'll do," he said grudgingly. "But you still look like somebody's starved parakeet. You're supposed to rest when I put you on the sick list. What you need is sleep."

Need. Kirk could feel it, an appeal the Vulcan couldn't make in words. He tried to sound casual as he said, "Why don't you turn in. I'll finish up here."

"Certainly, Captain. I shall be in my cabin."

McCoy watched him go with a doubtful eye. "That's what he said the last time."

"He'll be all right."

"So will you. I'm downgrading both of you for three days, Jim. You're dead on your feet and you don't know it. Get some rest and try to spend some time with Spock. T'serek's death may mean more to him than he wants to show."

Kirk turned away, thinking, more to me. How could he go to Spock with that lie between them? How could he not go? A chill of fear shook him. Spock wanted his mind, past all the intimacy of the body, and he hated what was in his mind, could not bear Spock to see the ugliness of him, could not bear to have Spock know he did not deserve Dray's pure gift, to have him learn that his chosen was not 'worthy of love.' But it was Spock's life, Spock's choice.

The door opened under his hand.

The light in the austere cabin was low, but that was the only concession to passion and necessity. The bed was still folded into the wall; Spock's few possessions were in their accustomed places --no music, no incense, no liquor. Only Spock was different, waiting for him in a long brown robe, one hand on the chair at his desk. The tension in the motionless figure shouted aloud that he had not been sure Kirk would come, was not sure now what his presence meant.

Kirk couldn't speak. Words were hollow. Lies in the throat of a liar. He couldn't meet that questioning gaze. It was for Spock to choose. He began to undress, awkward under Spock's gaze, littering the floor with his clothing. When he stood naked, he found the will to look up, the words....

"Whatever you want. If you still want me."